

Living Wisely in God's World

Studies in the Book of Proverbs

Martin Bleby

5. Mature Common Sense in God's Creation

Someone has described wisdom as 'living with the grain of the universe—knowing how the world works and living in accord with it'.¹ The gaining of such wisdom is a lifelong occupation, and comes with rich rewards.

Growing in Wisdom

Proverbs sees the acquisition of wisdom as a dedicated life-long task, not something that just happens and then you've got it. Just as 'An estate quickly acquired in the beginning will not be blessed in the end' (Prov. 20:21; see study 3), so anything worthwhile and lasting will take time and application:

My child, if you accept my words
and treasure up my commandments within you,
making your ear attentive to wisdom
and inclining your heart to understanding;
if you indeed cry out for insight,
and raise your voice for understanding;
if you seek it like silver,
and search for it as for hidden treasures—
then you will understand the fear of the Lord
and find the knowledge of God.
For the Lord gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;
he stores up sound wisdom for the upright;
he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly,
guarding the paths of justice
and preserving the way of his faithful ones.
Then you will understand righteousness and justice
and equity, every good path;
for wisdom will come into your heart,
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;
prudence will watch over you;
and understanding will guard you (Prov. 2:1-11).

Part of being wise is to know you haven't got it all, and there is always more to find out:

Give instruction to the wise, and they will become wiser still;
teach the righteous and they will gain in learning (Prov. 9:9).

Wisdom cannot be worn loosely—it must be internalised:

My child, keep my words
and store up my commandments with you;
keep my commandments and live,

¹ Mark Short, National Director Bush Church Aid Society, in Bible Studies at the Anglican Diocese of Willochra Mission Weekend, June 2014.

keep my teachings as the apple of your eye;
bind them on your fingers,
write them on the tablet of your heart.
Say to wisdom, "You are my sister,"
and call insight your intimate friend (Prov. 7:1–4).

Since 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight' (Prov. 9:10), we will never fully come to the end of it:

the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
which shines brighter and brighter until full day (Prov. 4:18).

Not that this leads you into ethereal realms, far removed from the discourse of ordinary life. Rather, it comes across simply as good sense:

One is commended for good sense,
but a perverse mind is despised (Prov. 12:8).

It can impart deep insight into human nature:

The purposes in the human mind are like deep water,
but the intelligent will draw them out (Prov. 20:5).

It enables you to speak a simple and direct word, that makes a difference:

Anxiety weighs down the human heart,
but a good word cheers it up (Prov. 12:25).

There is gold, and abundance of costly stones;
but the lips informed by knowledge are a precious jewel (Prov. 20:15).

To make an apt answer is a joy to anyone,
and a word in season, how good it is (Prov. 15:23).

The mind of the wise makes their speech judicious,
and adds persuasiveness to their lips.
Pleasant words are like a honeycomb,
sweetness to the soul and health to the body (Prov. 16:23–24).

Since wisdom comes from God, the effort to acquire wisdom is not initiated by us. Wisdom 'is active in seeking us—so that our own search, earnest as it has to be, ([Prov. 9:]17, 34), is a response, not an uncertain quest'.² God's wisdom issues the initial call:

Wisdom has built her house,
she³ has hewn her seven pillars.⁴
She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine,
she has also set her table.
She has sent out her servant- girls, she calls
from the highest places in the town,

² Kidner, p. 77.

³ Note that in Proverbs wisdom is personified as a woman. This does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that predominance in wisdom belongs to the female gender. Note that foolishness is also personified as a woman. See further in the final study.

⁴ 'seven pillars': these words 'have provoked ingenious but inconclusive discussion' (Kidner, p. 82). Seven being the number of completion or perfection, it may be saying simply that wisdom's house is very well-built.

"You that are simple, turn in here!"
To those without sense she says,
"Come, eat of my bread
and drink of the wine I have mixed.
Lay aside immaturity, and live,
and walk in the way of insight (Prov. 9:1-6).

We need to be wary of the alternative invitation, which can look very like it:

The foolish woman is loud;
she is ignorant and knows nothing.
She sits at the door of her house,
on a seat at the high places of the town,
calling to those who pass by,
who are going straight on their way,
"You who are simple, turn in here!"
And to those without sense she says,
"Stolen water is sweet,
and bread eaten in secret is pleasant."
But they do not know that the dead are there,
that her guests are in the depths of Sheol (Prov. 9:13-18).

What is the difference? Foolishness is loud; she has not prepared; she is seated at 'the high places' (where idols are worshipped?); those who are 'simple' (silly) and 'without sense' remain so—they do not 'lay aside immaturity'; she offers illegitimate and hidden (occult) sources of knowledge; the outcome is the opposite of life.

Wisdom is more than ready to be found:

I love those who love me,⁵
and those who seek me diligently find me.
Riches and honor are with me,
enduring wealth and prosperity.
My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold,
and my yield than choice silver.
I walk in the way of righteousness,
along the paths of justice,
endowing with wealth those who love me,
and filling their treasuries (Prov. 8:17-21).

Those who go the way of wisdom will reap wonderful rewards:

Happy are those who find wisdom,
and those who get understanding,
for her income is better than silver,
and her revenue better than gold.
She is more precious than jewels,
and nothing you desire can compare with her.
Long life is in her right hand;
in her left hand are riches and honor.
Her ways are ways of pleasantness,
and all her paths are peace.
She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her;
those who hold her fast are called happy (Prov. 3:13-18).

⁵ Note the relational aspect, which we will follow in the final study.

So the young person is exhorted to come to a place of settled and dependable stability, grounded in a relationship with God:

My child, do not let these escape from your sight:
keep sound wisdom and prudence,
and they will be life for your soul
and adornment for your neck.
Then you will walk on your way securely
and your foot will not stumble.
If you sit down, you will not be afraid;
when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.
Do not be afraid of sudden panic,
or of the storm that strikes the wicked;
for the Lord will be your confidence
and will keep your foot from being caught (Prov. 3:21–26).

It can see you through to old age:

Gray hair is a crown of glory;
it is gained in a righteous life (Prov. 16:21).

Wisdom and God's Created Universe

What, then is the connection between wisdom and 'living with the grain of the universe—knowing how the world works and living in accord with it'? It begins with the way God created and sustains the universe:

The LORD by wisdom founded the earth;
by understanding he established the heavens;
by his knowledge the deeps broke open,
and the clouds drop down the dew (Prov. 3:19–20).

Both the big picture and the small detail are here—all has to do with the wisdom, knowledge and understanding of the LORD God, who 'made the earth and the heavens' (Gen. 2:4). This same wisdom and understanding of God is the one who now cries out:

To you, O people, I call,
and my cry is to all that live.
O simple ones, learn prudence;
acquire intelligence, you who lack it . . .
Take my instruction instead of silver,
and knowledge rather than choice gold;
for wisdom is better than jewels,
and all that you may desire cannot compare with her (Prov. 8:4–5, 10–11).

This same wisdom claims to have been present with God and set in place before anything was made:

The Lord created⁶ me at the beginning of his work,⁷
the first of his acts of long ago.
Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
Before the mountains had been shaped,

⁶ A persuasive case can be made for translating this 'possessed' (Kidner, pp. 79–80).

⁷ Hebrew 'way', NRSV footnote.

before the hills, I was brought forth—
when he had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world's first bits of soil (Prov. 8:22–26).

This wisdom was instrumental in the construction and ordering of all things:

When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
then I was beside him, like a master worker (Prov. 8:23–30a).

Best of all, wisdom participates in the joy of God's creative action and its outcome:⁸

and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race (Prov. 8:30b–31).

Other parts of Scripture testify that God's nature and characteristics are revealed and can be discerned in the created order:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge (Ps. 19:1–2).

what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made (Rom. 1:19–20).

It follows from this that much wisdom can be gained by a wide and deep, even scientific study, of God's creation:

God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore . . . He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish (1 Kings 4:29, 32–33; see Study 1).

We have seen some of the wisdom gained from observation of nature:

the lizard can be grasped in the hand,
yet it is found in kings' palaces (Prov. 30:28; see Study 3).

Other examples are found elsewhere in Scripture:

Listen, and hear my voice;
Pay attention, and hear my speech.
Do those who plow for sowing plow continually?

⁸ Compare: 'God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good . . . Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done' (Gen. 1:31; 2:1–2).

Do they continually open and harrow their ground?
When they have leveled its surface,
do they not scatter dill, sow cummin,
and plant wheat in rows
and barley in its proper place,
and spelt as the border?
For they are well instructed;
their God teaches them.

Dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge,
nor is a cart wheel rolled over cummin;
but dill is beaten out with a stick,
and cummin with a rod.
Grain is crushed for bread,
but one does not thresh it forever;
one drives the cart wheel and horses over it,
but does not pulverize it.
This also comes from the Lord of hosts;
he is wonderful in counsel,
and excellent in wisdom (Isa. 28:23–29).

And, classically:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them . . .
O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth (Ps. 8:3–4, 9).

It was after God had given him a conducted tour of the creation, in great and small detail (see Job 40–41), that Job came out with the wise statement:

I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted (Job 42:2).

Christ our Wisdom in Creation

While the figure of wisdom in Proverbs 8 is something less than a person alongside God, the New Testament uses similar but more thoroughgoing language to delineate the role of the Son of God in creation. Paul speaks of 'Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Col. 2:2–3), and says of him:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Col. 1:15–17).

In the Revelation to John, the 'Son of Man' refers to himself as 'the origin of God's creation'. John in his gospel identifies Jesus as Son of God and Word of God:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth (John 1:1–3, 14 NRSV footnote).

The Letter to the Hebrews also speaks in the same vein:

in these last days [God] has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word (Heb. 1:1–3).

This is the one whom Paul calls 'Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Cor. 1:24), by virtue of his saving action on the cross (see 1 Cor. 1:18, 30). In this, the whole of creation is subject to his good rule, and so open to us (as in 1 Cor. 3:21–23: 'all things are yours'). True maturity, then, is to come together 'to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ' (Eph. 4:13), as we are given 'power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with [literally 'unto'] all the fullness of God' (Eph. 3:18–19). High-flown as this may sound, it is, as Ephesians 4–6 goes on to show, as practical as Proverbs—if not more so.